

## Developing the behavioural constellation of deprivation: Relationships, emotions and not quite being in the present

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**Abstract:** Although it is a welcome and timely idea, the behavioural constellation of deprivation (BCD) needs to explain how the development of personal control, trust, and perception of future risk is mediated through relationships with parents. Further, prioritising the present over the future may not be the essence of this constellation; perhaps *not* quite being, either in the present *or* in the future, is a better depiction.

This paper may signal the beginning of the end of psychology's failure to embrace political realities and tackle injustices. Its breadth of perspective is refreshing and very welcome. However, it raises several puzzling questions, two of which we hope to address in this commentary.

First: *How* is the behavioural constellation of deprivation (BCD) actually picked up by children? If Pepper & Nettle's (P&N's) argument is to hold, children must experience or grasp something like an extrinsic mortality risk – or perhaps some other risk to resources in the future – and thus act to prioritise the present over the uncertain future. However, how does the child *perceive* these threats? The authors quite rightly mention the role of learning through peer-group interactions – what might be called a horizontal transmission of culture – as well as the epigenetic consequences of early experiences. The authors primarily mention intergenerational – or what might be called vertical – transmission in the context of health factors. But relationships with parents are crucial to the development of personal control, trust, and perception of future risk; and understanding these relationships must be at the heart of the developing BCD.

From the earliest months, children and their caregivers continuously influence and change each other's states of being (Beebe et al. 1992). Self-regulation – which is the inevitable terrain in issues surrounding a future orientation – emerges within the dynamics of these relationships (Dix 1991), with parents' own impulsivity and emotion regulation constituting a crucial impact on children's self-regulation (Bridgett et al. 2015). In clinical groups, mothers with borderline personality disorder, in which impulsiveness is the core symptom, are more intrusive and insensitive toward their infants; their infants are less organized and positive in their emotional states and more often categorized as having “disorganized” patterns of attachment (Hobson et al. 2005). In nonclinical populations, caregivers' self-regulation appears to determine the extent to which they control their own reactions to children's challenging behaviours, which in turn reciprocally influence the children's self-regulation. A similarity between parents and children seems evident from many studies in levels of self-control and impulsivity (Boutwell & Beaver 2010) and in executive functioning capacity (even after controlling for parental education and verbal ability; Cuevas et al. 2014). Clear links between harsher parenting styles and higher levels of children's problem behaviours seem apparent, but only among mothers with poorer executive function (i.e., in the regulation of attention, inhibitory control, and working memory; Deater-Deckard et al. 2012). Caregivers' self-regulation appears to influence children in a broader way, creating the developmental niche to which the children need to adapt. For instance, chaotic and disorganised households appear negatively related to parental responsiveness to and acceptance of their children, which in turn predicts lower levels of executive functioning and self-regulation in kindergartners (Vernon-Feagans et al. 2016). Given the fairly exhaustive evidence about the importance of intergenerational influences in the BCD, particularly with regard to impulsiveness, neglecting these processes not only leaves an undesirable gap in the explanation but also seems to imply that the children's experience of (and adaptation to) the world of deprivation is minimally mediated by relationship.

There is a second puzzle concerning the “the prioritisation of the present over the future.” The authors' perception of this prioritisation as an adaptive and contextually

appropriate rather than pathological or maladaptive response is refreshing and intriguing, but – and this is its intriguing challenge – it raises two apparent contradictions. A focus on the present, on living in the now, on being in the moment is a well-known injunction from meditative (particularly Buddhist) traditions (Goldstein 2013) and has been taken up by the vast “mindfulness” industry as being important for well-being. Further, a focus on the present/the now/the moment is also a necessary condition of what might be called genuine engagement, whether with people or with the material world (Buber 1958; Reddy 2008; Stern 2004). In fact, P&N argue that this ability to resist the plans and lure of the future and experience the present as fully as possible allows genuine conversation, better communication, and a more sensitive way of knowing the world.

How does the dichotomy of present-versus-future orientation fit with the other literature? Our suspicion is that P&N’s use of the term requires an additional emotional dimension – anxiety, desire, or dissatisfaction – that, rather than constituting a prioritisation of the present, does not really *allow* a focus on or orientation toward the present. The behaviours implied in the BCD seem to reflect an attentional orientation to the nearest future, with almost an absent-minded attitude toward the present. It is possible that the contradictions are more apparent than real. In the meditative and mindfulness tradition, being in the present involves an explicit and reflective focus on a narrow connection – for example, with a flower, a thought, or a person’s smile. In contrast to the unreflective distractedness and impulsivity implied in the BCD, being in the present not only is reflective but involves effortful handling of distraction and irrelevance. P&N’s focus on “balancing of costs and benefits in the present with those likely to be realised in the future” is almost anathema to the kind of focus on the present moment in the meditative literature – even simply being *aware* of costs and benefits is precisely *not* being in the present. P&N talk of *assessing* the worth of events and objects in the present, but the other tradition deals with *experiencing* the present. In the “engagement” and communication literature, similarly, being in the present involves an openness to and interest in another person, object, or experience without the impulsivity or the impatience implied in BCD. Engaging in the present requires a harmony of desire and interest with that which is available in the present. In contrast, the BCD seems to reflect a disharmony

in the present-orientation implied in P&N's use of the term – a dissatisfaction with being in general, which allows neither an awareness of the present nor a trust in the distant future. In both of these traditions (mindfulness and engagement), the emotional dimension is crucial to explain what is meant by being in the present, and this dimension needs to be added to P&N's theory to qualify their use of the term “present-orientation,” perhaps shifting it to a not-quite-present and not-quite-future orientation.

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